

# 1850-today: Thailand



A brief people's history of Thailand over the past 150 years from its feudal past to its current state as a parliamentary capitalist democracy.

The historical processes that have transformed Thai society, and which are still in the process of transforming it, are no exception from the general world trend. Thailand has been changed out of all recognition during the last 150 years. Before the great transformations which occurred in the nineteenth century, Thai society was dominated by the Sakdina system, a form of Southeast Asian feudalism. Today, it is a modern capitalist parliamentary democracy. These changes have not taken place simply because of the wise foresight of some ruler, or the "civilising" influence of Western imperialist nations. The changes have taken place in conjunction with great changes in the productive forces within the Thai economy.

But more important still, a great many people whose names do not appear in the history books, have consciously and unconsciously played a part in these social transformations. Capitalist development, and the class struggle associated with this development, are the engines of change.

Initially, the Sakdina system was transformed into a centralised capitalist state, under the rule of an absolute monarchy. The monarchy struggled against the old nobles and local Sakdina rulers. The peasantry continually tried to avoid forced labour and refused to work as new capitalist wage labourers for low wages. Extra wage labourers had to be imported from China. Soon these Chinese workers were forming unions and struggling to improve their conditions. Finally, a combination of the 1932 economic crisis, and general political discontent among whole layers of society, led to the revolution which overthrew the absolute monarchy. Various forms of Constitutional rule followed, mainly dominated by periods of military dictatorship.

The successful 14th October 1973 mass uprising against the military dictatorship in Bangkok, shook the Thai ruling class to its foundations. It was the first time that the pu-noi (little people) had actually started a revolution from below. It was not planned and those that took part had only vague notions about the need for democracy, but the Thai ruling class could not shoot enough demonstrators to protect their regime. In fact the shooting just made people even more angry. It was not just a student uprising to demand a democratic constitution. It involved thousands of ordinary working class people and occurred on the crest of a rising wave of workers' strikes. Success in over-throwing the military dictatorship bred increased confidence.

Workers, peasants and students began to fight for more than just parliamentary democracy. They wanted social justice and an end to long-held privileges. Some wanted an end to exploitation and capitalism itself. In response, the Thai ruling class, together with most of the middle class, organised brutality of the utmost barbarity against workers, students and peasant activists. They installed a new dictatorship on the 6th October 1976 over the mutilated bodies of those struggling for freedom.

As they stood proudly to attention while the National Anthem was played, by order of the government, over public loudspeakers, the Thai ruling class and its middle class supporters believed that they had won. But meanwhile thousands were joining the Communist Party of Thailand (C.P.T.), either in body or in spirit. Thousands went directly to the jungle strongholds of the C.P.T. The rest nurtured their burning hatred of the ruling class in the city. This included most urban workers. Workers' strikes continued, although subdued by repression. Society became dangerously polarised for those at the top.

Those who joined the Left now became convinced that armed revolution was the only option. The tragedy is that they were led by an organisation which took up arms in order to carry out the "capitalist democratic revolution". They mistakenly believed that Thailand was a semi-feudal colony of the United States. This was the typically Stalinist and Maoist policy of the C.P.T. But Thailand was already capitalist. The only way forward was to struggle towards what Marx called a revolutionary struggle for socialism. The C.P.T. failed in its attempt at a democratic capitalist revolution and the organisation collapsed by the late 1980s.

But the struggle carried out by all those urbanites who joined the party after 1976, and the massive polarisation of Thai society was not in vain. The ruling class was forced to acknowledge that it could not win the battle against the pu-noi by violence and coercion alone. They were forced, by the level of resistance, to liberalise the political system, especially under the rule of Prime Minister Prem, a military officer who had spent time fighting the communists. They came to a compromise with the urbanites who had fled to the hills and with the working class who stayed behind in Bangkok to fight the bosses.

For a while, the ruling class felt that they had overcome their problems and any threats from below. The economy boomed in the so-called "Asian Miracle" period of the late 1980s. They were able to mould parliamentary democracy into a model suited to the needs of the capitalists by a controlled and gradual liberalisation process. Prosperity and money bought social peace. Money also bought votes for the various capitalist parties at election time. But then the first upset occurred when the rulers fell out among themselves. The army generals were losing out in their struggle to get their snouts in the trough, in competition with the civilian money politicians.

The generals staged a coup in 1991. This resulted in a massive popular uprising against the military government in May 1992. Once again, large crowds made up of workers, students and middle class people, came onto the streets of Bangkok, faced down an army firing live ammunition, and won. The effect was to significantly weaken the power of the military and also the power and influence of those who openly used privilege to throw their weight around in society. The new 1997 Constitution was both an attempt to buy-off popular discontent, with the promise of reforms, and to stabilise capitalist class rule in a more liberal form.

Then, just as the ruling class thought they had survived the May 1992 crisis without too much instability and damage to their power, the world economic crisis broke. Financial meltdown started in Bangkok in July 1997. The Suharto dictatorship was toppled in nearby Indonesia. Malaysia became unstable, with the dispute between Anwar and Mahathir. Splits and arguments about economic policy occurred within Thai ruling circles.

The Thai ruling class hopes that the new 1997 Constitution and "Good Governance" will iron out their problems. But the economic crisis was not just about greed, corruption and bad governance. It was part of how the capitalist system works throughout the world. There will be further crises and the growing working class cannot be continually bought-off by rising standards of living under such circumstances. The dream of a future Thailand in continuous economic boom, with the majority of the population becoming middle class, is total utopia. Meanwhile the Thai capitalist class is engaged in a massive re-structuring offensive against the working class. Market forces are to be introduced into state enterprises, state universities and state hospitals. Down-sizing and efficiency drives are the order of the day.

The pattern of class struggle between the ruled and the rulers in Thailand, over the last 25 years, has shown that the working class is a force to be reckoned with. At different periods one side has had the upper hand, at other times fortunes have been reversed, or compromises have been reached. The struggle takes place constantly and will never be resolved until the struggle for socialism has been successful. This is the task of the Thai working class.

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**More information**

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